

Paul Robeson, the Artist as Activist and Social Thinker

By John Henrik Clarke

Paul Robeson was indeed more than an artist, activist and freedom fighter. The dimensions of his talent made him our Renaissance man. He was the first American artist, Black or White, to realize that the role of the artist extends far beyond the stage and the concert hall. Early in his life he became conscious of the plight of his people, stubbornly surviving in a racist society. This was his window on the world. From this vantage point he saw how the plight of his people related to the rest of humanity. He realized that the artist had the power, and the responsibility, to change the society in which he lived. He learned that art and culture are weapons in a people's struggle to exist with dignity, and in peace. Life offered him many options and he never chose the easiest one. For most of his life he was a man walking against the wind. An understanding of his beginning and how he developed artistically and politically, will reveal the nature of his mission and the importance of the legacy of participation in struggle that we have inherited from him.

He was born, April 9, 1898, at a time of great crisis for his people. When he died, January 23, 1976, his people were still in a crisis, partly of a different nature, and partly the same crisis that they faced in the closing years of the nineteenth century, when Paul Robeson was born. He was born three years after Booker T. Washington made his famous Atlanta Exposition address, 1895, and two years after the Supreme Court announced a decision in the Plessy versus Ferguson Case, in which the concept of "Separate but Equal" facilities for Black Americans became law. Of course the separateness never produced any equalness. The time and the decision did produce some of the problems that Paul Robeson would address himself to in later years.

His early years were strengthened by binding family ties. They were not easy years. He recalled those years and reflected on their meaning in the introductory issue of the newspaper *Freedom*, November 1950.

"My father was of slave origin," he said. "He reached as honorable a position as a Negro could under these circumstances, but soon after I was born he lost his church and poverty was my beginning. Relatives from my father's North Carolina family took me in, a motherless orphan, while my father went to new fields to begin again in a corner grocery store. I slept four in a bed, ate the nourishing greens and cornbread.

Many times I stood on the very soil on which my father was a slave, where some of my cousins were sharecroppers and unemployed tobacco workers. I reflected upon the wealth bled from my near relatives alone, and of the very basic wealth of all this America beaten out of millions of Negro people, enslaved, freed, newly enslaved until this very day."

He grew to early manhood during the Booker T. Washington era. He made his professional debut at the Harlem YMCA in 1920, in a play, "Simon, the Cyrenian," by Redgely Torrence. The play was about an Ethiopian who steps out of a crowd to help a tired and haggard Jesus Christ carry his cross up Calvary Hill to be crucified. His role in this play was symbolic of his commitment to just causes and to oppressed people, the world over, the rest of his life. This dimension of his life is the main focus of this paper. He was not persecuted, denied a passport and attacked at Peekskill because he was a world famous concert singer and activist.

Many of his persecutors admired him in these capacities. He was persecuted, denied a passport and attacked at Peekskill because he was an artist and activist who used his art and his personality to call for change in the society in which he lived. This was not a late development in his life. He grew to manhood observing the need for change.

Paul Robeson attended elementary and high school in Westfield and Somerville, New Jersey. He won a four-year scholarship to Rutgers College and entered in the fall of 1915. Only two other Black students had attended the school since its founding in 1776. Robeson's achievements in both scholarship and athletics at Rutgers were extraordinary. He won Phi Beta Kappa honors in his junior year, was valedictorian of his

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

graduation class, and was the debating champion in all of his four years.

Although he was initially brutalized by his own team-mates when he tried out for the football team, he survived to become one of the greatest football players of all time. Walter Camp selected Robeson as his first-team All-America end for two years—1917 and 1918, and he was named on all important "consensus" All-America teams for both those years. Robeson was also a great all-round athlete, winning a total of 15 varsity letters in football, basketball, baseball and track.

In May of 1918 Reverend Robeson died, Paul's relatives and his football coach, Foster Sanford, were especially helpful to him during the trying time immediately after his father's death. Following his graduation in 1919, Paul went to live in Harlem and entered Columbia Law School, from which he graduated in 1923. To pay his way through law school, Paul played professional football on weekends, first with Fritz Pollard on the Akron, Ohio team in 1920 and 1921, and then with Milwaukee in 1922. In 1921, he met and married Eslanda Cardozo Goode, a brilliant young woman who was the first Black analytical chemist at Columbia Medical Center. Their marriage lasted forty-four years until Eslanda's death in 1965.

In the early 1920's Paul Robeson joined the Provincetown Players in Greenwich Village. This brought him to the attention of the American Playwright, Eugene O'Neil who selected him for the lead in his play, "All God's Children Got Wings." His performance in this play established his importance in the American Theatre. In 1924, he was in another Eugene O'Neil play, "The Emperor Jones." By 1925, he was known both in England and in the United States as an actor and as a concert singer. Lawrence Brown, who accompanied him during his first concert in 1925, remained with him for twenty-five years.

In these years following the First World War, Black Americans were discovering themselves, their culture and their history. Thousands of Black soldiers had returned from the war in Europe to face unemployment, bad housing and lynchings. The Universal Negro Improvement Association led by Marcus Garvey, and the intellectual movement called The Harlem Literary Renaissance reached their respective highs during this period. The years of the nineteen-twenties were proving grounds for Paul Robeson's development as an artist and a responsible person.

Many of the roles that Paul Robeson played in America were repeated in the theatres of London. It has been reported his political ideas took shape after George Bernard Shaw introduced him to the concept of socialism in 1928. This may be partly true about his political ideas in a formal sense, though his social awareness started before this time. His first visit to the Soviet Union in 1934 had a more profound influence on the shaping of his political ideas and understanding. Later, he publicly expressed his belief in the principles of scientific socialism. It was his convictions that a socialist society represents an advance to a higher stage of life for all mankind. The rest of his life was a commitment to this conviction.

He spoke out against oppression where ever he saw it, and not just the oppression of his own people. He went to Spain during the Civil War in that country and sang for the Republican troops and for the members of the International Brigades. This was part of a gathering of anti-Fascist forces who were in battle with the army of General Franco who was backed by Hitler and Mussolini. When Paul Robeson returned to the United States he expressed the belief that the war in Spain represented dangers for the world far beyond that country's borders.

"I saw the connection between the problems of all oppressed people and the necessity of the artist to participate fully," he said.

He opposed every form of racism in his own country; he was the first American artist to refuse to sing before a segregated audience. He spoke out against lynching, segregated theatres and eating places a generation before the beginning of what is referred to as the Black Revolution. He supported all organizations that he thought were working genuinely to improve the lot of his people and mankind.

In his book, *Robeson: Labor's Forgotten Champion*, (Balamp Publishing Co., Detroit, Mich., 1975), Dr. Charles H. Wright states that:

"Robeson saw the struggle of the working classes of Spain in the same terms that he saw the

struggles of the black man in the United States. He made this clear after he left Spain and embarked on a series of public appearances on behalf of the Republicans, both on the continent and in England. It was from the continent, probably the Spanish Embassy in Paris that he issued what became known as his Manifesto against Fascism."

The Manifesto reads, as follows:

"Every artist, every scientist must decide, now, where he stands. He has no alternative. There are no impartial observers.

Through the destruction, in certain countries, of man's literary heritage, through the propagation of false ideas of national and racial superiority, the artist, the scientist, the writer is challenged. This struggle invades the former cloistered halls of our universities and all her seats of learning.

The battlefield is everywhere. There is no sheltered rear. The artist elects to fight for freedom or slavery.

I have made my choice! I had no alternative!

The history of the era is characterized by the degradation of my people. Despoiled of their lands, their culture destroyed, they are denied equal opportunity of the law and deprived of their rightful place in the respect of their fellows.

Not through blind faith or through coercion, but conscious of my course, I take my place with you. I stand with you in unalterable support of the lawful government of Spain, duly and regularly chosen by its sons and daughters."

In January 1938 he visited Spain with his wife, Eslanda. Plans had already been made for him to sing to the troops in the International Abraham Lincoln Brigades.

This was not his introduction to the international aspects of the fight against Fascism. The Spanish Civil War started in June 1936, the Italian-Ethiopian War had started the year before. On December 20, 1937, Robeson had participated in a meeting on the Spanish Civil War at Albert Hall in London. This and other anti-fascist activity disenchanted the United States Department of State. This was probably the formal beginning of his harassment by that agency. This harassment would continue for another twenty years. In his writings and speeches, for most of the years of his active career, Paul Robeson was very explicit in explaining the motive and antecedents of his fight against every form of racism and oppression. At a Welcome Home Rally in Harlem, June 19, 1949, he restated his position and the nature of his commitment.

"I have traveled many lands and I have sung and talked to many peoples. Wherever I appeared, whether in professional concert, at peace meetings, in the factories, at trade union gatherings, at the mining pits, at assemblies of representative colonial students from all over the world, always the greeting came: "Take back our affection, our love, our strength to the Negro people and to the members of the progressive movement of America."

I was then, through my athletics and my university record, trying to hold up the prestige of my people; trying in the only way I knew to ease the path for future Negro boys and girls. And I am still in there slugging, yes, at another level, and you can bet your life that I shall battle every step of the way until conditions around these corners change and conditions change for the Negro people all up and down this land.

The road has been long. The road has been hard. It began about as tough as I ever had it in Princeton, New Jersey, a college town of Southern aristocrats, who from Revolutionary time transferred Georgia to New Jersey. My brothers couldn't go to high school in Princeton. They had to go to Trenton, ten miles away. That's right ♦ Trenton, of the "Trenton Six." My brother or I could have been one of the "Trenton Six."

Almost every Negro in Princeton lived off the college and accepted the social status that went with it. We lived for all intents and purposes on a Southern plantation. And with no more dignity than that suggests all the bowing and scraping to the drunken rich, all the vile names, all the Uncle Tomming to earn enough to lead miserable lives."

He could not see himself accepting any form of Jim-Crow Americanism. He said in many ways he hated what American was, but he lived what it promised to be. He defended the stated higher ideals and potential of the United States while calling attention to the fact that the nation's promise to all people had not been kept.

"And I defied," he said, "and I defy any part of this insolent, dominating America, however powerful; to challenge my Americanism; because by word and deed I challenge this vicious system to the death."

Paul Robeson would not let his public acceptance as an actor and singer, make him relax in comfort and forget the struggle for basic dignity still being waged by the rest of his people. On this point he said:

"I refuse to let my personal success, as part of a fraction of one percent of the Negro people, to explain away the injustices to fourteen million of my people; because with all the energy at my command, I fight for the right of the Negro people and other oppressed labor-driven Americans to have decent homes, decent jobs, and the dignity that belongs to every human being!

Somewhere in my childhood these feelings were planted. Perhaps when I resented being pushed off the sidewalk, when I saw my women being insulted, and especially when I saw my elder brother answer each insult with blows that sent would-be slave masters crashing to the stone sidewalks, even though jail was his constant reward. He never said it, but he told me day after day: "Listen to me, kid." (He loved me dearly.) "Don't you ever take it, as long as you live."

In my opinion, the artistic and political growth of Paul Robeson has its greatest stimulant during the nineteen-thirties. Paul was always discovering something new in the human situation, and new dimensions in old things he already knew. He was, concurrently, both a student and a scholar, in pursuit of knowledge about the world's people and the conditions of their lives. Africa, its people and cultures were of special interest to him. In a note, dated 1936, included in his "Selected Writings," published by the Paul Robeson Archives, 1976, he makes this comment:

"I am a singer and an actor. I am primarily an artist. Had I been born in Africa, I would have belonged, I hope, to that family which sings and chants the glories and legends of the tribe. I would have liked in my mature years to have been a wise elder, for I worship wisdom and knowledge of the ways of men."

His artistic strength was in his love for the history, songs, and for culture of his people. In this way he learned to respect the cultures of all people.

In an article published in the *Royal Screen Pictorial*, London, April 1935 he said:

I am a Negro. The origin of the Negro is African. It would, therefore, seem an easy matter for me to assume African nationality. At present the younger generation of Negroes in America looks towards Africa and asks, "What is there to interest me? What of value has Africa to offer that the Western world cannot give me? Their acknowledgement of their common origin, species, interest and attitudes binds Jew to Jew; a similar acknowledgement will bind Negro to Negro. I realize that this will not be accomplished by viewing from afar the dark rites of the witch doctor. It may be accomplished, or at least furthered, by patient inquiry. To this end I am learning Swahili, Twi, and other African dialects which come easily to me because their rhythm is the same as that employed by the American Negro in speaking English; and when the time is ripe, I propose to investigate on the spot the possibilities of such a regeneration as I have outlined. Meanwhile, in my music, my plays, my films. I want to carry always this central idea to be African. Multitudes of men have died for less worthy ideals; it is more eminently

worth living for.

This interest in Africa, started during his "London years" continued throughout the rest of his life; and very logically led to his participation in the development and leadership of organizations like the Council on African Affairs (1937-1955) and the National Negro Congress. In an article in his "Selected Writings," that was first published in *Fighting Talk*, April 1955, Paul Robeson speaks of his discovery of Africa in this way:

I "discovered" Africa in London. That discovery back in the twenties profoundly influenced my life. Like most of Africa's children in America, I had known little about the land of our fathers. Both in England, where my career as an actor and singer took me, I came to know many Africans. Some of their names are now known to the world Azikiwe, and Nkruma, and Kenyatta, who has just been jailed for his leadership of the liberation struggles in Kenya.

Many of these Africans were students, and I spent many hours talking with them and taking part in their activities at the West African Students Union building. Somehow they came to think of me as one of them; they took pride in my successes; and they made Mrs. Robeson and me honorary members of the Union.

Besides these students, who were mostly of princely origin, I also came to know another class of African the seamen in the ports of London, Liverpool and Cardiff. They too had their organizations, and much to teach me of their lives and their various peoples.

As an artist it was most natural that my first interest in Africa was cultural. Culture? The foreign rulers of that continent insisted there was no culture worthy of the name in Africa. But already musicians and sculptors in Europe were astir with their discovery of African art. And as I plunged, with excited interest, into my studies of Africa at the London University and elsewhere, I came to see that African culture was indeed a treasure-store for the world.

Those who scorned the African languages as so many "barbarous dialects" could never know, of course, of the richness of those languages, and of the great philosophy and epics of poetry that have come down through the ages in these ancient tongues. I studied these languages as I do this day: Yoruba, Efik, Benin, Ashanti and the others.

I now felt as one with my African friends and became filled with a great, glowing pride in these riches, new found for me. I learned that along with the towering achievements of the cultures in ancient Greece and China there stood the culture of Africa, unseen and denied by the imperialist looters of Africa's material wealth.

I came to see the root sources of my own people's culture, especially in our music which is still the richest and most healthy in America. Scholars had traced the influence of African music to Europe to Spain with the Moors, to Persia and India and China, and westward to the Americas. And I came to learn of the remarkable kinship between African and Chinese culture (of which I intend to write at length some day).

My pride in Africa, that grew with the learning, impelled me to speak out against the scornors. I wrote articles for the *New Statesman* and *Nation* and elsewhere championing the real but unknown glories of African culture.

I argued and discussed the subject with men like H. G. Wells, and Laski, and Nehru; with students and savants.

He now saw the logic in this culture struggle and realized, as never before, that culture was an instrument in a people's liberation, and the suppression of it was an instrument that was used in their enslavement. This point was brought forcefully home to him when the British Intelligence cautioned him about the political meaning of his activities. He knew now that the British claim that it would take one thousand years to prepare Africans for self-rule was a lie. The experience led him to conclude that:

Yes, culture and politics were actually inseparable here as always. And it was an African who directed my interest in Africa to something he had noted in the Soviet Union. On a visit to that country he had traveled east and had seen the Yakuts, a people who had been classed as a "backward Race" by the Czars. He had been struck by the resemblance between the tribal life of the Yakuts and his own people of East Africa.

What would happen to a people like the Yakuts now that they were freed from colonial oppression and were a part of the construction of the new socialist society?

I saw for myself when I visited the Soviet Union how the Yakuts and the Uzbeks and all the other formerly oppressed nations were leaping ahead from tribalism to modern industrial economy, from illiteracy to the heights of knowledge. Their ancient culture blossoming in new and greater splendor. Their young men and women mastering the sciences and arts. A thousand years? No, less than 30!

During his London years, Paul Robeson was also involved with a number of Caribbean people and organizations. These were the years of the Italian-Ethiopian War, the self-imposed exile of Haile Selassie and Marcus Garvey, and the proliferation of African and Caribbean organizations, with London headquarters, demanding the improvements in their colonial status that eventually led to the independence explosion. In an article in the *National Guardian*, Paul Robeson spoke of his impressions of the Caribbean people, after returning from a concert tour in Jamaica and Trinidad. He said:

I feel now as if I had drawn my first great of fresh air in many years. Once before I felt like that. When I first entered the Soviet Union I said to myself, "I am a human being. I don't have to worry about my color."

In the West Indies I felt all that and something new besides. I felt that for the first time I could see what it will be like when Negroes are free in their own land. I felt something like what a Jew must feel when first he goes to Israel, what a Chinese must feel on entering areas of his country that now are free.

Certainly my people in the islands are poor. They are desperately poor. In Kingston, Jamaica, I saw many families living in shells of old automobiles, hollowed out and turned upside down. Many are unemployed. They are economically subjected to landholders, British, American and native.

But the people are on the road to freedom. I saw Negro professionals: artists, writers, scientists, scholars. And above all I saw Negro workers walking erect and proud.

Once I was driving in Jamaica. My road passed a school and as we came abreast of the building a great crowd of school children came running out to wave at me. I stopped, got out of my car to talk with them and sing to them. Those kids were wonderful. I have stopped at similar farms in our own deep South and I have talked to Negro children everywhere in our country. Here for the first time I could talk to children who did not have to look over their shoulders to see if a white man was watching them talk to me.

They crowded around my car. For hours they waited to see me. Some might be embarrassed or afraid of such crowds of people pressing all around. I am not embarrassed or afraid in the presence of people.

I was not received as an opera singer is received by his people in Italy. I was not received as Joe Louis is received by our own people. These people saw in me not a singer, or not just a singer. They called to me: "Hello, Paul. We know you've been fighting for us."

In many ways his concert tours were educational tours. He had a similar experience, in New Orleans, on October 19, 1942 when he sang before a capacity audience of black and white men and women, seated without segregation, in the Booker T. Washington School auditorium. On this occasion he said:

I had never put a correct evaluation on the dignity and courage of my people of the deep South until I began to come south myself. I had read, of course, and folks had told me of strides made♦but always I had discounted much if it, charged much of it to what some people would have us believe. Deep down, I think, I had imagined Negroes of the South beaten, subservient, cowed.

But I see them now courageous and possessors of a profound and instinctive dignity, a race that has come through its trials unbroken, a race of such magnificence of spirit that there exists no power on earth that could crush them. They will bend, but they will never break.

I find that I must come south again and again, again and yet again. It is only here that I achieve absolute and utter identity with my people. There is no question here of where I stand, no need to make a decision. The redcap in the station, the president of your college, the man in the street♦they are all one with me, part of me. And I am proud of it, utterly proud of my people.

He reaffirmed his commitment to the Black struggle in the South by adding:

We must come south to understand in their starkest presentation the common problems that beset us everywhere. We must breathe the smoke of battle. We must taste the bitterness, see the ugliness♦we must expose ourselves unremittingly to the source of strength that makes the black South strong!

In spite of the years he and his family spent abroad, he was never estranged from his own people. In his book, *Here I Stand*, he explained this in essence when he said:

"I am a Negro. The house I live in is in Harlem♦this city within a city, Negro Metropolis of America. And now as I write of things that are urgent in my mind and heart, I feel the press of all that is around me here where I live, at home among my people."

The 1940's the war years, was a turning point in his career. His rendition of "Ballad For Americans," made a lot of Americans, Black and white, rethink the nature of their commitment, or lack of it, in the making of genuine democracy in this country. The song stated a certainty that "Our Marching Song to a land of freedom and equality will come again." Mr. Robeson sang: "For I have always believed it and I believe it now." In this song, and his life he was asking that America keep its promise to all of its people.

On October 19, 1943, he became the first Black actor to play the role of Othello with a White supporting cast, on an American stage. He had played this role years before in London.

In 1944, Paul Robeson was awarded the Spingarn Medal by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Soon afterwards he took the lead in a course of actions more direct and radical than the NAACP. He led a delegation that demanded the end to racial bars in professional baseball. He called on President Truman to extend the civil rights of Blacks in the South. He became a founder and chairman of the Progressive Party which nominated former Vice President Henry A. Wallace in the 1948 presidential campaign.

In the years immediately following the Second World War, Paul Robeson called attention to the unfinished fight for the basic dignity of all people. The following excerpt was extracted from a speech he made in Detroit, Michigan on the Tenth Anniversary of the National Negro Congress:

"These are times of peril in the history of the Negro people and of the American nation.

Fresh from victorious battles, in which we soundly defeated the military forces of German, Italian and Japanese fascism, driving to oppress and enslave the peoples of the world, we are now faced with an even more sinister threat to the peace and security and freedom of all our

peoples. This time the danger lies in the resurgent imperialist and pro-fascist forces of our own country, powerfully organized gentlemen of great wealth, who are determined now, to attempt what Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo tried to do and failed. AND The ELECTED POLITICAL LEADERSHIP OF THE UNITED STATES IS SERVING AS THE SPEARHEAD OF THIS NEW DRIVE TOWARD IMPERIALIST WAR IN THE WORLD AND THE RUTHLESS DESTRUCTION OF OUR FREEDOM AND SECURITY HERE AT HOME.

I understand full well the meaning of these times for my country and my people. The triumph of imperialist reaction in America now, would bring death and mass destruction to our own and all other countries of the world. It would engulf our hard won democratic liberties in the onrush of native fascism. And it would push the Negro people backward into a modern and highly scientific form of oppression, far worse than our slave forefathers ever knew.

I also understand full well the important role which my people can and must play in helping to save America and the peoples of all the world, from annihilation and enslavement. Precisely as Negro patriots helped turn back the red-coats at Bunker Hill, just as the struggles of over 200,000 Negro soldiers and four million slaves turned the tide of victory for the Union forces in the Civil War, just as the Negro people have thrown their power on the side of progress in every other great crisis in the history of our country—so now, we must mobilize our full strength, in firm unity with all the other progressive forces of our country and the world, to set American imperialist reaction back on its heels.

On this occasion he further stated:

"I have been a member of the National Negro Congress since its inception. I have taken great pride in its struggles to unite the progressive forces of the Negro people and of organized labor in common struggle. And I know that I now talk to an assemble of approximately one thousand delegates, the overwhelming majority of whom are the elected representatives of millions of trade unionists throughout our country.

Here is the concrete expression of one of the most salutary developments in the political history of America—the unity of the Negro people and the progressive forces of labor of which they are an increasingly active part."

The trouble of the post war years, mainly the lack of civil rights for his people, made him step up his political activity. At the World Peace Congress in Paris in 1940, he stated that:

"It is unthinkable that American Negroes will go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations against a country (the Soviet Union) which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind."

His words, often exaggerated out of context, turned every right wing extremist organization in America against him. Their anger reached a sad and destructive climax during two of his concerts in Peekskill, New York in the summer of 1949.

His interest in Africa, that had started early in his life continued through his affiliations with "The Council on African Affairs" and the column that he wrote regularly for the newspaper *Freedom*.

His association with organized labor was almost as long and consistent as his association with the concert stage. In a speech, "Forge Negro-Labor Unity for Peace and Jobs," delivered in Chicago, before nine hundred delegates to the National Labor Conference for Negro Rights, June 1950, his association and commitment to the laboring class was restated in the following manner:

"No meeting held in America at the mid-century turning point in world history holds more significant promise for the bright future toward which humanity strives than this National Labor Conference for Negro Rights. For here are gathered together the basic forces—the Negro sons and daughters of labor and their white brothers and sisters—whose increasingly active intervention in national and world affairs is an essential requirement if we are to have a peaceful and democratic solution of the burning issues of our times.

Again we must recall the state of the world in which we live, and especially the America in which we live. Our history as Americans, Black and white, has been a long battle, so often unsuccessful. For the most basic rights of citizenship, for the most basic rights of citizenship, for the most simple standards of living, the avoidance of starvation♦for survival.

I have been up and down the land time and again, thanks in the main to you trade unionists gathered here tonight. You helped to arouse American communities to give answer to Peekskill, to protect the right of freedom of speech and assembly. And I have seen and daily see the unemployment, the poverty, the plight of our children, our youth, the backbreaking labor of our women♦and too long, too long have my people wept and mourned. We're tired of this denial of a decent existence. We demand some approximation of the American democracy we have helped to build."

He ended his speech with this reminder:

"As the Black worker takes his place upon the stage of history♦not for a bit part, but to play his full role with dignity in the very center of the action♦a new day dawns in human affairs. The determination of the Negro workers, supported by the whole Negro people, and joined with the mass of progressive white working men and women, can save the labor movement. ♦ This alliance can beat back the attacks against the living standards and the very lives of the Negro people. It can stop the drive toward fascism. It can halt the chariot of war in its tracks.

And it can help to bring to pass in America and in the world the dream our father dreamed♦of a land that's free, of a people growing in friendship, in love, in cooperation and peace.

This is history's challenge to you. I know you will not fail."

In 1950 Paul Robeson's passport was revoked by the State Department, though he was not charged with any crime. President Truman had signed an executive order forbidding Paul Robeson to set foot outside the continental limits of the United States. "Committees To Restore Paul Robeson's Passport" were organized in the United States and in other countries around the world. The fight to restore his passport lasted eight years.

For Paul Robeson these were not lost or inactive years; and they were not years when he was forgotten or without appreciation, though, in some circles, his supporters "dwindled down to a precious few." He was fully involved, during these years, with the Council on African Affairs, *Freedom Magazine*, The American Labor Movement, The Peace Movement, and The National Council of American-Soviet Friendship.

From its inception in November 1950 to the last issue, July-August 1955, Paul Robeson wrote a regular column for the newspaper *Freedom*. After his passport was restored in 1958, he went to Europe for an extended concert tour. In 1963 he returned to the United States, with his wife Eslanda, who died two years later. After her death he gave up his home in Harlem and moved to Philadelphia to spend his last years with his sister Mrs. Marion Forsythe.

Next to W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Robeson was the best example of an intellect who was active in his peoples freedom struggle. Through this struggle both men committed themselves to the struggle to improve the lot of all mankind. Paul Robeson's thoughts in this matter is summed up in the following quote from his book, *Here I Stand*.

"I learned that the essential character of a nation is determined not by the upper classes, but by the common people, and that the common people of all nations are truly brothers in the great family of mankind ♦ And even as I grew to feel more Negro in spirit, or African as I put it then, I also came to feel a sense of oneness with the white working people whom I came to know and love.

This belief in the oneness of humankind, about which I have often spoken in concerts and elsewhere, has existed within me side by side with my deep attachment to the cause of my own

race. Some people have seen a contradiction in this duality♦I do not think however, that my sentiments are contradictory ♦ I learned that there truly is a kinship among us all, a basis for mutual respect and brotherly love."

At the time of his death, January 23, 1976, a new generation was discovering Paul Robeson for the first time. An older generation was regretting that it had not made the best use of the strengths and hope that he had given to them. The writer, L. Clayton Jones, made this comment in the *Amsterdam News*, after his death.

"One watches with restrained anger as a nation of hypocrites grudgingly acknowledges the passing of a twentieth century phenomenon, Paul Robeson, All American Athlete, Shakespearean Actor, Basso Profundo, Linguist, Scholar, Lawyer, Activist. He was all these things and more."

In December 1977, an Ad Hoc Committee to End the Crimes Against Paul Robeson was formed to protest the inaccurate portrayal of Paul Robeson in a new play by Philip Hayes Dean. Their statement read, in part:

"The essence of Paul Robeson is inseparable from his ideas♦those most profoundly held artistic, philosophical and political principles which evolved from his early youth into the lifelong commitments for which he paid so dear and from which he never wavered down to his final public statement in 1975.

In life, Paul Robeson sustained the greatest effort in the history of this nation to silence a single artist. He defied physical and psychological harassment and abuse without once retreating from his principles and the positions to which he dedicated his life. We believe that it is no less a continuation of the same crime to restore him, that he is safely dead, to the pantheon of respectability on the terms of those who sought to destroy him.

Robeson is the archetype of the Black American who uncompromisingly insists on total liberation. His example and his fate strike to the very heart of American racism.

For the nation to confront him honestly would mean that it confronts itself♦to begin at last the process of reclamation of the national soul."

[John Henrik Clarke Virtual Museum](#) | [The Virtual Masters of the Museums](#)
[FRONTal View: An Electronic Journal of African Centered Thought](#)
[NBUF Homepage](#) | [DuBois Learning Center Homepage](#)